IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA

CHARLES E. THOMAS

9071 Mill Creek Road, Apt. 1501

Levittown, PA 19054

CIVIL ACTION

Plaintiff,

DOCKET NO.:

v.

GATEHOUSE MEDIA, LLC 175 Sully's Trail, 3rd Floor Pittsford, NY 14534

AND

GATEHOUSE MEDIA PENNSYLVANIA:
HOLDINGS, Inc. d/b/a BUCKS COUNTY:
COURIER TIMES:
175 Sully's Trail, 3rd Floor:
Pittsford, NY 14534:

Defendants.

JURY TRIAL DEMANDED

CIVIL ACTION COMPLAINT

Charles Thomas (hereinafter referred to as "Plaintiff," unless indicated otherwise), by and through his undersigned counsel, hereby avers as follows:

INTRODUCTION

1. Plaintiff has initiated this action to redress violations by GateHouse Media, LLC and GateHouse Media Pennsylvania Holdings, Inc. d/b/a Bucks County Courier Times (hereinafter referred to as "Defendants," unless indicated otherwise) for violations of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act ("ADEA" - 29 U.S.C. §§ 621 et. seq.), the Americans with Disabilities Act, as amended ("ADA" - 42 USC §§ 12101 et. seq.), the Family and Medical Leave Act ("FMLA - 29 U.S.C. §2601 et. seq.), and the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act

("PHRA"). Plaintiff asserts, *inter alia*, that he was unlawfully terminated from Defendants. As a direct consequence of Defendants' unlawful actions, Plaintiff seeks damages as set forth herein.

JURISDICTION AND VENUE

- 2. This Court has original subject matter jurisdiction over the instant action pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§1331 and 1343(a)(4) because it arises under laws of the United States and seeks redress for violations of civil rights under the FMLA, ADEA and the ADA. There lies supplemental jurisdiction over Plaintiff's future state-law claims because they arise out of the same common nucleus of operative facts as Plaintiff's federal claims asserted herein.
- 3. This Court may properly maintain personal jurisdiction over Defendants because Defendants' contacts with this state and this judicial district are sufficient for the exercise of jurisdiction in order to comply with traditional notions of fair play and substantial justice, satisfying the standard set forth by the United States Supreme Court in <u>International Shoe Co. v. Washington</u>, 326 U.S. 310 (1945) and its progeny.
- 4. Pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §1391(b)(1) and (b)(2), venue is properly laid in this district because all of the acts and/or omissions giving rise to the claims set forth herein occurred in this judicial district.

PARTIES

- 5. The foregoing paragraphs are incorporated herein in their entirety as if set forth in full.
 - 6. Plaintiff is an adult individual, with an address as set forth in the caption.

¹ Plaintiff's claim under the PHRA is referenced herein for notice purposes. He is required to wait 1 full year before initiating a lawsuit from date of dual-filing with the EEOC. Plaintiff must however file his lawsuit in advance of same because of the date of issuance of her federal right-to-sue letter under the ADA and ADEA. Plaintiff's PHRA claims however will mirror identically his federal claims under the ADA and ADEA.

- 7. Defendant GateHouse Media, LLC is a company in the business of publishing locally-based media in the United States. As of December 2017, Defendant publishes 142 daily newspapers, more than 466 community publications and more than 569 local market websites that reach more than 22 million people each week.
- 8. Defendant GateHouse Media Pennsylvania Holdings, Inc. d/b/a Bucks County Courier Times is an affiliate of Defendant GateHouse Media, LLC and operates the Bucks County Courier Times at the facility at which Plaintiff worked.
- 9. Upon information and belief all Defendants overlapped in management and operations of the location at which Plaintiff worked. Upon further information and belief, because of their interrelation of operations, common ownership or management, centralized control of labor relations, common ownership or financial controls, and other factors during Plaintiff's employment Defendants were sufficiently interrelated and integrated in their activities, labor relations, ownership and management that they may be treated as a single, joint and/or integrated employer for purposes of the instant action.
- 10. At all times relevant herein, Defendants acted by and through their agents, servants and/or employees, each of whom acted at all times relevant herein in the course and scope of their employment with and for Defendants.

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

- 11. The foregoing paragraphs are incorporated herein in their entirety as if set forth in full.
 - 12. Plaintiff is 58 years old.
- 13. Plaintiff began working for Defendants' predecessor, Colkins Media, in approximately 2005. In the summer of 2017, Defendants' acquired Colkins Media through the

acquisition of Plaintiff's location. In total, Plaintiff worked for Defendants' and their predecessor for approximately 12 years until his termination in September of 2017.

- 14. During Plaintiff's tenure with Defendants' and their predecessor, Plaintiff worked in numerous positions, including as a Photo Editor, Supervisor of the Photo Department for three publications and as an Anchor/Video Reporter (the position Plaintiff held at the time of his termination from Defendants).
- 15. During the relevant time period, Plaintiff's immediate supervisor was Hugh Haynie and he was indirectly supervised by Shane Fitzgerald.
- 16. During his employment with both Defendants and their predecessor, Plaintiff performed his job very well. Furthermore, Plaintiff was very experienced in the field of media and video/photo editing.
- 17. Plaintiff has and continues to suffer from various disabilities under the ADA, including but not limited to severe issues with his shoulders for which he requested and took medical leave for while employed with Defendants.
- 18. Plaintiff's aforesaid health conditions, at times, limit his ability to perform some daily life activities, including but not limited to lifting, performing manual labor, and physical activity and working at times.
- 19. Despite Plaintiff's aforementioned disabilities and limitations, he was able to perform the duties of his job well; however, Plaintiff did require reasonable medical accommodations at times (including time off and light duty).
- 20. On or about June 27, 2017, Plaintiff requested and took an approximate 30 day leave of absence to undergo surgery and rehabilitation to his shoulder which was designated by Defendants as FMLA leave.

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- 21. Prior to taking his leave, Plaintiff made his management, including Mr. Haynie, aware that he required the leave due to his need for shoulder surgery rehabilitation, as well Defendants' HR department.
- 22. In direct response to advising the company of his need for leave, his management, including Mr. Haynie, began to subject him to hostility based on his need for time off, including emphasizing that Plaintiff's leave would be a hardship and that Plaintiff would need to get ahead of his shoots before going out on leave.
- 23. Additionally, Mr. Haynie continued to show hostility towards Plaintiff's need for time off during Plaintiff's leave, including by contacting Plaintiff and requiring that Plaintiff perform work at times while Plaintiff was still on FMLA leave.
- 24. Although Plaintiff's doctor recommended that Plaintiff remain out of work for 9 to 12 weeks following his surgery, Plaintiff returned to work after approximately 4 weeks of leave due to the pressure he was facing to return to work.
- 25. When Plaintiff returned to work on approximately July 27 of 2017, he was released to work with lifting restrictions. Those lifting restrictions remained in place through the time of his termination in September of 2017.
- 26. On or about September 8, 2017, approximately 5 weeks after returning from his medical/FMLA leave and requesting reasonable lifting accommodations, Plaintiff was terminated by Defendants allegedly due to a company-wide reduction in force ("RIF").
- 27. At the time of Plaintiff's separation from Defendants, he was the oldest in his department.
- 28. Prior to Plaintiff being informed of his termination, Plaintiff's management held a meeting with Plaintiff and all other members of Plaintiff's department to discuss the possible

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RIF. During that meeting, Plaintiff's younger, less experienced co-workers were specifically assured that they were "safe" and that they would be either retained in their positions or given new positions within Defendants.

- 29. Plaintiff was the only person in his department who was not retained and/or moved into an alternative position even though prior to his termination Plaintiff specifically offered to work in a lesser role, take less money or to be converted to any available role within Defendants (including any of the multiple positions Plaintiff held during his 12 year tenure with Defendants and Defendants' predecessor). Furthermore, Plaintiff was more experienced than the younger co-workers who were retrained by the company.
- 30. Prior to Plaintiff's termination from Defendants, Plaintiff was offered an unsolicited severance package in exchange for waiving any and all claims he may have.²
- 31. Upon information and belief, Plaintiff's job duties were assumed by a younger individual following Plaintiff's termination from Defendants.
- 32. Therefore, Plaintiff believes and avers that he was terminated from his position with Defendants due to his age, his actual and/or perceived disabilities, in retaliation for requesting medical accommodations and/or for requesting and/or exercising his FMLA rights.

² See e.g. Staffieri v. Northwestern Human Servs., 2013 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 72115 at **14-15 (E.D. Pa. May 22, 2013)(an employer who offered severance when policies did not require upon condition of waiving FMLA claim supported finding of pretext in FMLA claim among other facts); See also Bartlett v. NIBCO Inc., 2011 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 28072 (N.D. Ind. 2011)("Severance pay packages contingent upon a release of claims which are offered contemporaneously with the notice of termination are not covered by [Rule 408]", and the motive in offering same is admissible evidence in a retaliation claim and is admissible at trial in this case); Karl v. City of Mountlake Terrace, 2011 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 59085 (W.D. Wash. 2011)(severance agreements are admissible in retaliation claims when made contemporaneous to termination, as they are not governed by FRE 408); EEOC v. Republic Servs., Inc., 640 F. Supp. 2d 1267 (D. Nev. 2009)(denying summary judgment and considering as evidence in wrongful termination case that a company would offer severance when an employee is supposedly terminated in a manner that doesn't warrant severance per an explicit company policy).

First Cause of Action <u>Violations of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act ("ADEA")</u> (Age Discrimination)

- 33. The foregoing paragraphs are incorporated herein in their entirety as if set forth in full.
- 34. At the time of Plaintiff's separation from Defendants, he was the oldest employee in his department.
- 35. Prior to Plaintiff being informed of his termination, Plaintiff's management held a meeting with Plaintiff and all other members of Plaintiff's department to discuss the possible RIF. During that meeting, Plaintiff's younger, less experienced co-workers were specifically assured that they were "safe" and that they would be either retained in their positions or given new positions within Defendants.
- 36. Plaintiff was the only person in his department who was not retained and/or moved into an alternative position even though prior to his termination Plaintiff specifically offered to work in a lesser role, take less money or to be converted to any available role within Defendants (including any of the multiple positions Plaintiff held during his 12 year tenure with Defendants and Defendants' predecessor). Furthermore, Plaintiff was more experienced than the younger co-workers who were retrained by the company.
- 37. Upon information and belief, Plaintiff's job duties were assumed by a younger individual following Plaintiff's termination from Defendants.
- 38. These actions as aforesaid constitute unlawful age discrimination under the ADEA.

Second Cause of Action

<u>Violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act, as amended ("ADA")</u>

([1] Actual/Perceived/Record of Disability Discrimination; [2] Retaliation

- 39. The foregoing paragraphs are incorporated herein in their entirety as if set forth in full.
- 40. Plaintiff suffered from qualifying health conditions under the ADA (as amended) which affected his ability (at times) to perform some daily life activities, as described *supra*.
- 41. Plaintiff requested reasonable accommodations from Defendants, including but not limited to a medical leave and lifting accommodations.
- 42. In response to Plaintiff's health conditions and need for reasonable accommodations, Plaintiff was subjected to hostility and animosity by Defendants' management.
- 43. Just a few weeks following Plaintiff's medical leave and request for reasonable accommodations, Plaintiff was terminated from Defendants.
- 44. Plaintiff believes and therefore avers that Defendants discriminated against Plaintiff by terminating his employment because of: (1) his known and/or perceived health problems; (2) his record of impairment; and/or (3) in retaliation for his requests for leave and lifting accommodations.
 - 45. These actions as aforesaid constitute violations of the ADA.

Third Cause of Action <u>Violations of the Family and Medical Leave Act ("FMLA")</u> (Interference and Retaliation)

- 46. The foregoing paragraphs are incorporated herein in their entirety as if set forth in full.
- 47. Plaintiff was an eligible employee under the definitional terms of the FMLA, 29 U.S.C. § 2611(a)(i)(ii).
- 48. Defendants are engaged in an industry affecting commerce and employs fifty (50) or more employees for each working day during each of the twenty (20) or more

- calendar work weeks in the current or proceeding calendar year, pursuant to 29 U.S.C.A § 2611(4)(A)(i).
- 49. Plaintiff was entitled to receive leave pursuant to 29 U.S.C.A § 2612 (a)(1) for a total of twelve (12) work weeks of leave on a block or intermittent basis.
- Defendant committed interference and retaliation violations of the FMLA by: (1) terminating Plaintiff for requesting and/or exercising his FMLA rights and/or for taking FMLA-qualifying leave; (2) by considering Plaintiff's FMLA leave needs in making the decision to terminate him;

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff prays that this Court enter an Order providing that:

- A. Defendant is to be prohibited from continuing to maintain its illegal policy, practice or custom of discriminating/retaliating against employees and are to be ordered to promulgate an effective policy against such unlawful acts and to adhere thereto;
- B. Defendant is to compensate Plaintiff, reimburse Plaintiff and make Plaintiff whole for any and all pay and benefits Plaintiff would have received had it not been for Defendant's illegal actions, including but not limited to past lost earnings, future lost earnings, salary, pay increases, bonuses, medical and other benefits, training, promotions, pension, and seniority. Privileged Plaintiff should be accorded those benefits illegally withheld from the date he first suffered retaliation/discrimination at the hands of Defendant until the date of verdict;
- C. Plaintiff is to be awarded liquidated and/or punitive damages, as permitted by applicable law(s) alleged asserted herein, in an amount believed by the Court or trier of fact to be appropriate to punish Defendant for its willful, deliberate, malicious and outrageous conduct and to deter Defendant or other employers from engaging in such misconduct in the future;

D. Plaintiff is to be accorded any and all other equitable and legal relief as the Court deems just, proper and appropriate including for emotional distress;

E. Plaintiff is to be awarded the costs and expenses of this action and reasonable

legal fees as provided by applicable federal and state law;

F. Any verdict in favor of Plaintiff is to be molded by the Court to maximize the

financial recovery available to Plaintiff in light of the caps on certain damages set forth in

applicable federal law; and

G. Plaintiff's claims are to receive a trial by jury to the extent allowed by applicable

law. Plaintiff has also endorsed this demand on the caption of this Complaint in accordance with

Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 38(b).

Respectfully submitted,

KARPF, KARPF & CERUTTI, P.C.

By:

Ari R. Karpf, Esq.

3331 Street Road

Two Greenwood Square

Building 2, Ste. 128

Bensalem, PA 19020 (215) 639-0801

Dated: April 30, 2018

AND REPORT OF THE PROPERTY OF

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA

CASE MANAGEMENT TRACK DESIGNATION FORM

Charles E. Thom	100	ţ	CIVIL ACTION	'			
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Gatehouse Media, LI	LC, et al.		NO.				
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(c) Arbitration - Cases required to be designated for arbitration under Local Civil Rule 53.2.							
(d) Asbestos – Cases involving claims for personal injury or property damage from exposure to asbestos.							
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4/30/2018	6		Plaintiff				
Date	Attorne	y-at-law	Attorney for	***************************************			
(215) 639-0801	(215) 639	-4970	akarpf@karpf-law.com				
Telephone	FAX N		E-Mail Address				

(Clv. 660) 10/02

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA — DESIGNATION FORM to assignment to appropriate calendar,				
Address of Plaintiff. 9071 Mill Creek Road, Apt. 1501, Levittown, PA				
Address of Defendant: 175 Sully's Trail, 3rd Floor, Pittsford, NY 1453	4			
Place of Accident, Incident or Transsculon: Defendants place of business	Aller I for a			
Use Reverse Side Por	·			
Oces this civil action involves nongovernmental corporate party with any parent corporation	and any publicly held corporation owning 10% or more of its stock? Yes O No. M			
(Attach two copies of the Disclosure Statement Form in accordance with Fed.R.Civ.P. 7.1(a)) 1025 14092			
Does this case involve multidistrict litigation possibilities?	Yes No.			
BLATED CASE, IF ANY:	Date Terminated:			
Page Number: Judge				
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. Is this case related to properly included in an earlier numbered suit pending or within one y	car previously terminated action in this court?			
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Does this case involve the same issue of fact or grow out of the same transaction as a prior action in this court?	and hending or within one year breatheary terminates			
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. Does this case involve the validity or infringement of a patent already in suit or any earlier	numbered case pending or within one year proviously			
terminated action in this court?	Yes□ No□			
. Is this case a second or successive habeas corpus, social security appeal, or pro se civil rigi	hts case filed by the same individual?			
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IVIL: (Place V in ONE CATEGORY ONLY)				
Federal Question Cases:	B. Diversity Jurisdiction Cases;			
1. Indemnity Contract, Marine Contract, and All Other Contracts	1. B Insurance Contract and Other Contracts			
2. o FELA	2. D Airplane Personal Injury			
3. D Jones Act-Personal Injury	3. D Assault, Defamation			
4. Antitrust	4. □ Marine Porsonal Injury			
5. D Patent	5. D Motor Vehicle Personal Injury			
6. D Labor-Management Relations	6. O Other Personal Injury (Piease specify)			
7. N Civil Rights	7. D Products Liability			
8. □ Habeas Corpus	8. Products Liability — Asbestos			
9. Securities Act(s) Cases	9. All other Diversity Cases			
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1. □ All other Federal Question Cases (Please specify)				
ARBITRATION CER (Check Appropriate	Category)			
Ari R. Karpf , counsel of record do hereby cer M Pursuant to Local Civil Rule 53.2, Section 3(a)(2), that to the best of my knowledge an	tify:			
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Relief other than monetary damages is sought.	1 7 10 10 1			
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Case 2:18-cv-01811-ER Document 1 Filed 04/30/18 Page 13 of 13 CIVIL COVER SHEET

JS 44 (Rev. 06/17)

The JS 44 civil cover sheet and the information contained herein neither replace nor supplement the filing and service of pleadings or other papers as required by law, except as provided by local rules of court. This form, approved by the Judicial Conference of the United States in September 1974, is required for the use of the Clerk of Court for the

purpose of initiating the civil do	This form, approved by the Judicial Conference of the second conference	f the United States in September 19 FTHIS FORM.)	74, is required for the use of the	e Clerk of Court for the			
I. (a) PLAINTIFFS		DEFENDANTS					
THOMAS, CHARLES	E.	GATEHOUSE MI	GATEHOUSE MEDIA, LLC, ET AL.				
(c) Attorneys (Firm Name, A Karpf, Karpf & Cerutti, I	(CEPT IN U.S. PLAINTIFF CASES) (Iddress, and Telephone Number) P.C.; 3331 Street Road, Two Greenwood	County of Residence of First Listed Defendant Monroe (IN U.S. PLAINTIFF CASES ONLY) NOTE: IN LAND CONDEMNATION CASES, USE THE LOCATION OF THE TRACT OF LAND INVOLVED. Attorneys (If Known) Square,					
Suite 128, Bensalem, PA	19020; (215) 639-0801; akarpf@karpf-	law.com					
II. BASIS OF JURISDI	CTION (Place an "X" in One Box Only)	III. CITIZENSHIP OF P	RINCIPAL PARTIES				
1 U.S. Government X 3 Federal Question Plaintiff (U.S. Government Not a Party)		(For Diversity Cases Only) P Citizen of This State	FF DEF 1 Incorporated or Prin of Business in T				
2 U.S. Government Defendant			2 Incorporated and Pri of Business In A				
		Citizen or Subject of a Foreign Country	3 3 Foreign Nation	6 6			
IV. NATURE OF SUIT		FOR EDITURE/PENALTY	Click here for: Nature of BANKRUPTCY	of Suit Code Descriptions.			
GONTRACT 110 Insurance 120 Marine 130 Miller Act 140 Negotiable Instrument 150 Recovery of Overpayment & Enforcement of Judgment 151 Medicare Act 152 Recovery of Defaulted Student Loans (Excludes Veterans) 153 Recovery of Overpayment of Veteran's Benefits 160 Stockholders' Suits 190 Other Contract 195 Contract Product Liability 196 Franchise REALPROPERTY 210 Land Condemnation 220 Foreclosure 230 Rent Lease & Ejectment 240 Torts to Land 245 Tort Product Liability 290 All Other Real Property	PERSONAL INJURY 310 Airplane 365 Personal Injury 370 Assault, Libel & Slander 330 Federal Employers' Liability 340 Marine 345 Marine Product Liability 350 Motor Vehicle Product Liability 355 Motor Vehicle Product Liability 360 Other Personal Injury 362 Personal Injury Medical Malpractice Product Liability 362 Personal Injury Medical Malpractice Product Liability PERSONAL PROPE 370 Other Personal Property Damage 385 Property Damage 385 Property Damage 385 Property Damage 385 Property Damage 386 Personal Injury 362 Personal Injury Medical Malpractice PRISONER PETTERS PRISONER PETTERS PRISONER PETTERS PRISONER PETTERS Sandamana Sand	1 625 Drug Related Seizure of Property 21 USC 881 1 690 Other 1 EABOR 1 710 Fair Labor Standards Act 2 Act 3 Act 4 Act 3 Act 4 Act 4 Act 4 Act 5 Act 7 20 Labor/Management 8 Relations 1 740 Railway Labor Act 7 751 Family and Medical 1 Leave Act 1 790 Other Labor Litigation 1 791 Employee Retirement 1 Income Security Act 1 MMHGRA-PION 1 462 Naturalization Application 1 465 Other Immigration Actions	422 Appeal 28 USC 158 423 Withdrawal 28 USC 157 PROPERTYRIGHTS 820 Copyrights 830 Patent 835 Patent - Abbreviated New Drug Application 840 Trademark SOCIAL SECURITY 861 HIA (1395ff) 862 Black Lung (923) 863 DIWC/DIWW (405(g)) 865 RSI (405(g)) 865 RSI (405(g)) FEDERAL TAX SUITS 870 Taxes (U.S. Plaintiff or Defendant) 871 IRS—Third Party 26 USC 7609	OTHERSTATIONS 375 False Claims Act 376 Qui Tam (31 USC 3729(a)) 400 State Reapportionment 410 Antitrust 430 Banks and Banking 450 Commerce 460 Deportation 470 Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations 480 Consumer Credit 490 Cable/Sat TV 850 Securities/Commodities/ Exchange 891 Agricultural Acts 893 Environmental Matters 893 Environmental Matters 895 Freedom of Information Act 896 Arbitration 899 Administrative Procedure Act/Review or Appeal of Agency Decision 950 Constitutionality of State Statutes			
	emoved from D 3 Remanded from Appellate Court	Reopened Anoth		n - Litigation -			
VI. CAUSE OF ACTION	ON Cite the U.S. Civil Statute under which you ADA (42USC12101); ADEA (29U) Brief description of cause: Violations of the ADA, ADEA, FM	SC621); FMLA (29USC260)1)				
VII. REQUESTED IN COMPLAINT:	CHECK IF THIS IS A CLASS ACTION UNDER RULE 23, F.R.Cv.P.		CHECK YES only JURY DEMAND	y if demanded in complaint: 2: X Yes 'No			
VIII. RELATED CAS IF ANY	E(S) (See instructions): JUDGE		DOCKET NUMBER				
DATE 4/30/2018	SIGNATURE OF A	TORNEY OF RECORD					
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